

Gender-based Violence and Ephesians 5: Reflections on the Ethics, Hermeneutics and Didactics of a Community Bible Study in Suva, Fiji

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1 Introduction

Although the Pacific Theological College is primarily thought of as a regional, ecumenical institution, it is located in a specific place, namely Suva, Fiji Islands. This creates a certain tension, and therefore a challenge to its faculty members: On the one hand, we are working in a regional context, with students (and staff) from all over the South Pacific (cf. Ernst 2006), which poses a challenge to as well as opportunities for teaching and learning; on the other hand, we are placed in a specific context, namely the people of the Fiji Islands, with its own particular challenges and opportunities.

One aspect of this location in a specific context is that some members of faculty have always been engaged locally – some of us are asked to preach from time to time, and sometimes we are requested to give talks, lectures, or make other contributions to church and community life. This paper arises out of this context. Specifically, this is a reflective paper on the process of facilitating an 'interactive Bible Study' on Eph 5:21-33 in an ecumenical gathering of Christians, both women and men, meeting in Suva, Fiji Islands, on 4 December 2014, as part of the "16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence" programme organised by the *Suva Christian Network (Talanoa)*.¹

In the process of preparing and conducting this Bible Study with about 80 people, I realised anew the complexity of such a process – not only in terms of doing this Bible Study in this context, but also in my own learning process. I also recognised that my own approach to handling such a Bible Study had changed in the past couple of decades. Fifteen years or so ago, having just completed my doctoral

1 An invitation leaflet with some information is available at <http://houseofsarah.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Ecumenical-Seminar-Flyer-and-Information3.pdf> (accessed 1 December 2014).

dissertation (Szesnat 1998d; cf. Szesnat 1995, 2008), I would have done this very differently – and I do not think that it would have been useful for people. My focus would have been historical and social/cultural, and the hermeneutical and theological contexts would not have been clear.

If nothing else, this paper is an attempt at self-reflection: not necessarily because my fundamental views about the text have changed (though I do reflect a little on this at the end), nor my views on early Christianity and questions of gender, but mostly because my perspectives on integrating interpretative work into a larger liberation-theological framework have developed in various ways.²

Perhaps I should add that I am not aiming to produce something entirely new in the following reflections: if nothing else, I would like to invite readers into a number of considerations, challenges, and learning opportunities that I have tried to grapple with. Neither am I claiming to have found 'the way to do' a Bible Study for this purpose in the given context: I am aware of a number of shortcomings, and I suspect that there are others. But, for what it is worth, here is a first step.

2 Hermeneutical Starting Point

Describing one's starting point is more complex than it might at first appear. The notion of the hermeneutical circle has become commonplace today, however it is conceptualised, especially since liberation theology argued that the starting point of theology is (or ought to be) context or praxis: i.e., context/praxis → reflection → action; and back to context/praxis again (Segundo 1976, 8-9). Having learned my most foundational theology in a liberation-theological context (South Africa during the apartheid era), I, too, will begin with life context. In reality, of course, the hermeneutical circle is really a never-ending spiral without a fixed starting point: when we think about the life context, we are already shaped by a complex web of prior experience and considerations; indeed, we experience context only through participation/action.

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- 2 Prior to completing this paper for the celebratory volume in which it is to appear, I presented a summary of it to a small group of pastors and theologians in Germany, namely at the annual meeting of the *Heidelberger Arbeitskreis für Sozialgeschichtliche Bibelauslegung* (January 2015). I am grateful for that opportunity to tighten up the argument, and for the discussion that ensued.

2.1 Life / Situational Context

The idea of addressing violence against women in the context of Fiji arises from a real-life context: battered women, intimate partner violence, domestic violence – whatever it may be called, such violence against women is undeniably part of our reality, whether we like it or not. Of course, this is also a global issue, but that does not make it any better. I quote from the summary of a major empirical study recently conducted and published in Fiji (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre 2013, 2); the severity of its findings speak for itself:

Fiji's rates of violence against women and girls are among the very highest in the world: 64% of women who have ever been in an intimate relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a husband or intimate partner in their lifetime, and 24% are suffering from physical or sexual partner violence today. This includes 61% who were physically attacked and 34% who were sexually abused in their lifetime. Rates of emotional abuse are also high: 58% of ever-partnered women experienced emotional violence in their lifetime, and 29% in the previous 12 months before the survey. Overall, 72% of ever-partnered women experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence from their husband/partner in their lifetime, and many suffered from all 3 forms of abuse simultaneously.

Although I cannot base this on empirical research, it is worth noting that the fact that men beat 'their women' is usually not even disputed – at least in my experience; it appears to be taken as a fact of life. This was also the case at the Bible Study that I then conducted – the question of denial was not even raised by participants. Rather, it appears to be taken as a fact of life.

The textual focus for the Bible Study was chosen by the steering committee of the convening group as a result of soundings taken at the previous year's event. Using Eph 5 to legitimise violence against women (and wives/spouses in particular) is common – not just in Fiji or the Pacific (cf. Schlueter 1997; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002). This might strike the casual observer as perplexing since the text says nothing at all about violence. Clearly, any such argument has to be based firstly on isolating the submission of women/wives aspect from the context of the text, and then supplementing it with a further, completely non-textual argument which basically claims that a wife who does not 'submit' deserves to

be beaten. The fact that the text says nothing at all about this is a useful opening to cover at least the most fundamental aspect that a Bible Study should achieve: that violence against women/wives is completely unacceptable.

2.2 Personal Context

Before I go to the text that I am meant to prepare for this Bible study, I am already shaped by certain presuppositions, or my prejudgement / prejudice, as Gadamer calls it (Gadamer 1990). This includes the fact that my own approach to the Scriptures is fundamentally shaped by the experience of what was then often called 'contextual theology' in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid – though this was, in the main, a code word for liberation theology (Cochrane 2001, 2008). As such, I recognise that the Bible is a site of struggle (Schüssler Fiorenza 1997; West 2008): not only is the interpretation of the Scriptures a contested arena, but the Scriptures themselves are a witness to the struggle against the idols of death, and for the God of life (Richard 1983; Sobrino 1993; Gutiérrez 1991). Recognition of the multiplicity of voices within the Bible, the polysemy of texts, and the constant, ongoing task of meaning-making are all part of this (Croatto 1983, 1987). Issues of gender and sexuality are as much part of this as are politics, economics, and so on. My own previous work on gender and sexuality in antiquity, with a focus on Paul and Philo of Alexandria (Szesnat 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d, 1999), also inevitably shapes how I come to the text in Eph 5.

I am also aware that the text in Eph 5 has had a long 'history of effect' (i.e., *Wirkungsgeschichte* à la Gadamer), in a variety of ways and contexts, past and present; indeed, that was the reason why the text was chosen by the organising committee in the first place. A text like Eph 5:22 – 6:11 has, at certain times and in certain contexts, become a text of terror, to borrow Phyllis Trible's phrase (cf. Trible 1984), not just for women, but also for slaves and their descendants (Martin 1991; Meeks 1996). The text therefore becomes a complex theological mine field: On the one hand, a lot of serious damage has been done to people through the use of this passage as a kind of 'clobber text', to the extent that some readers are so pained by it that they avoid the text altogether. We might want to consider Howard Thurman's haunting recollection of reading the Bible to his illiterate grandmother, who had been a slave in the ante-bellum United States of America, and who told him never to read from the letters of Paul, since her slave master had instructed the minister who occasionally

preached to them to focus on the injunction to slaves to obey their masters (Thurman 1949, 30-31). On the other hand, precisely because the text still functions as a tool of oppression today, it is imperative to address it.

Yet another presupposition for me is that gender-based violence (and, as I would argue, any violence) is incompatible with Christian life. I arrived at this not simply through socio-cultural conditioning, though that is no doubt part of this:³ a complex path of personal social interactions and ideological influences, including the reading of the Scriptures, all contributed to shaping this conviction.

It is also part of my own context that I approach any given text as a person with a particular life history, identity, class, ethnicity, and so on. Reading a text that addresses wives and husbands, children and parents/fathers, slaves and slave owners, makes this particularly challenging, and poses certain problems. Interpreters with a very different life context might find my explorations difficult to follow, but the challenge of reading the Scriptures communally as Christians lies precisely in this area.

Finally, given that I was asked to prepare an 'interactive Bible Study', I also need to mention what models of Bible Study approaches have shaped my own. I am primarily influenced by the kind of *Contextual Bible Study* (CBS) approach developed by what was then called the Institute for the Study of the Bible (now: Ujamaa Institute) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. This is a communal, group-based Bible study approach which is fundamentally a way of reading the Scriptures for liberation in order to foster agency and action in poor and marginalised communities.⁴ Of course, Fiji is not South Africa. Any given model needs to be adapted for different contexts, and I do not wish to claim in any way that I what I created represents such an approach, even though I see myself as working in that tradition of liberation-theological praxis. In the Pacific, I prefer to call the approach I use 'community Bible study for social transformation'.

3 Given the prevalence of intimate partner violence in the kind of society I grew up in as a child and youth, it would be simplistic to call this presupposition as simply 'cultural'. If anything, it was influenced by a very specific sub-cultural milieu, and even there more on account of its ideology, and not necessarily practice.

4 The approach has been extensively described and analysed, especially in the writings of Gerald O. West (Ujamaa Centre Staff and West 2007; West 1993, 1999, 2011, 2014).

3 Initial Textual Observations

A careful reading of the text, i.e. Eph 5:21-33, throws up a number of issues. The most obvious matter for those trained in Biblical scholarship is that this text is part of a genre known as a 'domestic code' or 'household code'⁵ which starts at 5:22 and ends at 6:9. We find similar kinds of codes in the New Testament and other ancient Greek and Roman sources, including Jewish texts (cf. MacDonald 2011; Strecker 1989; Balch 1988; Lührmann 1981). The household code in Eph addresses three paired groups of household members: wives (5:22-23) and husbands⁶ (5:24-33); children (6:1-3) and fathers (6:4); slaves (6:5-8) and slave owners (6:9). In each case, the pair appears to be in a hierarchically structured status relationship, and the text addresses the lower status person first. Part of the problem of the text is that the pairing is fictionalised or idealised, as it were – then as now: real life relationships are much more complex (MacDonald 2011, 2012). For example, not all men would have been husbands, fathers, and slave owners at the same time; a woman might be a wife, but also a child of parents, and also a slave owner; etc. In other words, in real life (then as now), there is not a simple top-down hierarchy, but multiple intersecting hierarchies and relationships.

The text I was meant to focus on (5:21-33) is part of a larger textual unit, though this is less obvious in translation than it is in Greek. Since Greek allows the writer to construct very long sentences – something that is not easily possible in many, perhaps most languages – English (and other) translations naturally tend to break up the Greek sentence structure into shorter English sentences. Partially as a result of this, some of the connections are obscured,⁷ and therefore also the structural unity of the broader context of the passage. It makes sense to start reading with the larger sense unit that begins at 5:15: "Be careful, therefore, how you live" or "Watch carefully how you live" (βλέπετε οὖν ἀκριβῶς πῶς περιπατεῖτε),

5 Also known in scholarship as *Haustafel*, the German word for this genre.

6 In the Greek text, the broader terms γυναῖκες (women/wives) and ἄνδρες (men/husbands) are used since Greek does not distinguish between women/wives and men/husbands. However, the text and its cultural context clearly implies the paired 'wife and husband' roles in an ancient household, rather than a general 'women and man' reference.

7 Representing this and a few other grammatical problems of the text in translation is a notoriously problematic matter, which is naturally also affected by shifts in interpretation (cf. Fiore 2003).

which itself picks up 5:8, the matter of living "as children of the light" (ὡς τέκνα φωτός περιπατεῖτε). Everything that follows, including the household codes, depends on this injunction ("Watch carefully how you live"):

First, there is the resulting exhortation not to be "like those without understanding" (ὡς ἄσοφοι, 5:16); instead, the readers/listeners are told to "be filled with/in⁸ the Spirit" (πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι, 5:18). This 'being filled' is explored with three examples, which are constructed with three main participial clauses: "as you sing psalms" etc. (λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς [ἐν] ψαλμοῖς, 5:19); "giving thanks" (εὐχαριστοῦντες, 5:20); and finally, "being subject to one another in fear/awe of Christ" (ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις ἐν φόβῳ Χριστοῦ, 5:21). The household codes that follow (5:22 – 6:11) are grammatically and thematically subordinate to 5:21 (see also Barth 1974, s.v.; cf. Wessels 1989, 71). This is underlined by the fact that the first sentence of the code (5:22) does not even have the verb ("submit"), though it is implied – a common feature in Hellenistic Greek.⁹

It is significant that many translations and commentators conclude the paragraph here, at the end of 5:21, and begin a new paragraph in 5:22. The problem with this common presentation is that the connection to the last example (the participial clause, "being subject to each other") is easily lost, and that is highly problematic. This is, therefore, a crucial point that is worth repeating: namely, that *the three paired exhortations in the form of a household code, starting in 5:22, are all subordinate to 5:21.*

There are tensions in this text – and tensions in a text are usually worth exploring. Firstly, 5:21 speaks of *mutual* submission, yet the following household code seems to imply that only *one* side of each pair is supposed to submit or obey (wives, children, and slaves). This tension is something that, at least until recently, has tended to be pushed aside in scholarship, partially because there has been a

8 The usual understanding of this phrase (*with* the Spirit) is disputed by John-Paul Heil, who argues on linguistic grounds that a translation as "*in* the Spirit" would be preferable (Heil 2007), the implication being that "the implied agent of this filling is the ascended Christ, the implied content is gifts of Christ's divine love". While this is persuasive, it does not alter the sense sufficiently to warrant introducing this into the Bible Study.

9 As a even glance at the text-critical apparatus of Nestle-Aland^{27/28} shows, some scribes who copied the ancient Greek New Testament manuscripts apparently felt this and tried to supply it as either a 2nd or a 3rd person plural imperative: "be subject to".

tendency to discuss the household codes outside of their framing in a given letter (e.g., Tanzer 1995). What is frequently lacking in scholarship is a detailed discussion of just *how* the household code functions within the letter in which it is used. This is important historically (we are in danger of missing the rhetorical strategy and the overall point of the letter) but also theologically in our own contemporary contexts. Therefore, if I want to be open to potentially liberative meaning disclosure of a text, a focus on 5:22-33 alone is not helpful.

Secondly, the christological analogy used for the husbands¹⁰ creates further tension, both in itself, and when viewed in its canonical context: The exhortation to husbands to love their wives "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (5:25, partially repeating 5:2), pushes the reader/listener to consider just *how* Christ loved the church, just *how* Christ "gave himself up for her" (ἐαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς). Historically, the first audience would have considered this question in light of oral tradition; today, it is the canonical environment that will at least partially shape the reading / listening community's thoughts on this, though the reality of today's oral traditions of 'what Christ did for us' will also affect our reading practice.

Once we acknowledge this canonical referentiality (indeed: intertextuality), the larger frame of the letter itself comes to mind: If we postulate that a key thought in Eph is that God's peace has overcome all enmity, what contextual considerations does this set up for our text? We might see this as a third aspect to the potential tension that the text creates within its larger epistolary context.

All these tensions destabilise a common¹¹ interpretation of this text, or, one might actually say, destabilises the text itself. It is true, of course, that if one reads *backwards* from the code and its exhortations to the three paired groups – a perfectly sensible reading strategy in itself – one could question just how much remains of that

10 There is a different kind of (and much simpler) christological analogy for wives as well as slaves, but that is another story.

11 It is noteworthy that both conventional conservative and also feminist interpreters agree on the function of the text regarding the relationship of women and men, or wives and husbands. To be precise: both understand the text as affirming the subjection of women. The interpretative methodologies might differ, and the theological evaluation of course differs as well, but the fundamental reading outcome is very similar. This is not necessarily a reason to suspect this reading, but it give us cause to take a second look.

mutual subjection. This is particularly so if one does not stop at 5:33 but continues to read on in order to include the second and third pair in the household code: In the end, it is wives who are told to submit to their husbands, implicitly (and paradoxically, one might say) precisely by omitting that verb in Greek (5:22); it is the children who are told to obey (ὕπακούω) their parents (6:1); it is the slaves who are also told to obey (ὕπακούω) their masters (6:5).

Nevertheless, if I read the text from a *forward* direction, the demand to the entire group that is addressed, namely that they should *subject themselves to each other mutually*, could equally well be taken to question the core assumptions we make (and perhaps those of the first-century audience as well), namely how the household codes that follow are to be understood: If the readers/listeners are enjoined to subject themselves to each other, the following household code with its status-based assumptions becomes problematic. The text thus destabilises itself and its readers / listeners; the tension within the text begins to produce effects.¹²

Finally, what may well help us in this process is the fact that, as Ian McFarland has pointed out as well (McFarland 2000, 354), the exhortation to be mutually subjected constitutes a logical impossibility (when read literally) in the sense that it creates an infinite loop: Literally, "being mutually subject to each other" suggests the image of two people standing in front of a doorway, urging each other to be the first to go through – in perpetuity, thus resulting in neither going through. This can hardly be the point that the text is supposed to convey. The reader / listener is therefore forced to consider alternative meaning scenarios for this phrase, and a canonical perspective, especially taking into account other text from the Pauline letter corpus as well as the gospels should come to mind: For examples, the fairly frequent encouragement in the Pauline letter corpus to do certain things 'to each other' (i.e., mutually), or the synoptic passages that address leadership in terms of subjection (Mk 10:43 parr.).

12 My point is not quite the same as that of Markus Barth (1974), also reiterated by Francois Wessels (1989): in essence, their readings are based on the claim that this is the view of the writer of Ephesians. I am less confident about our ability to construct the intentions of the author. Rather, I suggest that this is a possible interpretative scenario, both for the author and the first audience in the first century.

4 The Bible Study

4.1 Basic Design Considerations

A number of factors had to be taken into account: For starters, I had limited time for preparation, which meant that I had very little recourse to scholarly literature prior to the Bible Study exercise. In other words, in the preparation of the Bible Study itself, I relied mostly on memory, as well as a fresh reading of the whole Letter to the Ephesians.

Just as with the text that I was asked to look at, I was also given a set time framework that I could not alter in a significant way. This created a problem for me: CBS work is based on small-group work with frequent group reports to the full number of participants. Given the time frame, it was clear that this would not be done. As a result, a single, final feedback session would have to suffice.

Otherwise, the basic process and approach of the CBS would fit; that is, a series of set questions that are handed out in stages (see Appendix 1), and which are designed to maintain a balance between directing participants' attention to text and context, while being open enough to allow groups to shape their learning and discussion so that it becomes their own.

I knew that the group would be diverse in terms of the background (social, educational, church, gender, etc.). Some people knew each other, some did not. It was going to be a one-off Bible Study without follow-up. Language was going to be a problem in that we used English as the medium of communication, yet not all participants were comfortable enough in the language to express themselves, yet using translators would have required more time. Status differences among participants (e.g., the presence of *talatala*, i.e., ministers) further complicated the group discussion processes.

Most, if not all participants in the Bible Study would approach the text with a fundamental attitude of trust: Some might be uncomfortable with some aspects of it, but the basic expectation is one that takes it for granted that the text can tell us something about how to lead our lives today. I could express this pejoratively as naivety, but equally well (and positively) as open trust. This is not, in essence, all that different from what the South African experience has shown; indeed, the South African CBS approach takes this as one of its starting points.

Methodologically, a key insight in the South African context (which is at least to some extent corroborated by similar work in other contexts) was and is that the fundamental interpretative approach taken – whether historical, narrative, or whatever else – is not in itself necessarily crucial (West 1993, 1995).¹³ Depending on text and context, a variety of methodologies can work, even though at least in some contexts, historical issues may be asked for by groups even where academic interpreters might not expect this (West 2004a). I decided to avoid historical reference points in respect of Eph 5, primarily because I am not convinced that this can easily be communicated in a useful way in the context of this specific Bible Study, but also because I am frequently not convinced that the historical arguments proposed by some are actually all that persuasive (e.g., contra Fee 2002), or that the hermeneutical strategy behind it is helpful in this context (e.g., contra Tanzer 1995). As a result, I ignored classic scholarly debates such as that on the authorship of Eph in the design of the Bible Study – always with the proviso that if a question were to arise from the discussion, I would be prepared to respond.

My own experience with forms of contextual Bible Study has been limited to working with narrative texts, and this seems to be the primary focus of work done among those from whom I learned this approach (Ujamaa Centre Staff and West 2007). Designing a similar kind of study for a text from the New Testament letter corpus, i.e. texts which are frequently based on a form of propositional rhetoric, poses different challenges. In particular, this is because I took an educated guess that most participants in the Bible Study are (a) not used to reading much beyond the Bible and perhaps a local newspaper, and (b) are instead used to reading small snippets of text in isolation from their immediate context.

Still, as in much other CBS work, a key design challenge was to encourage and empower participants to read the text in context(s): both the context of their own lives and experience, but also the context of short passages within the larger scriptural context.

Involving context sometimes involves difficult choices, though, as in the case of Eph 5:21-33. In this case, it is relatively easy to find a starting point (Eph 5:15, as shown above). Yet where do I end the

13 To use Ricoeurian terminology: behind the text; world of the text; in front of the text (Ricoeur 1976, 1978, 1981). Literature on the use of Ricoeur's work in Biblical hermeneutics abounds; see, for example, Sandra Schneiders (1999) and Mark Wallace (1990).

textual focus of the Bible study? Genre considerations show that the sense unit continues until 6:11 (i.e., the second and third pair in the household code). However, I chose not to direct attention to this block for time reasons, knowing well that this affects how one reads 5:22-33: After all, the nature of the exhortations to child and father / parents, and to slave and slave master, could well influence how we read the first pair (wife / husband). This was a decision which some interpreters might see as a fundamental flaw, and I have to admit that I am not entirely comfortable with it. Nevertheless, time considerations are important as well, and the focus on gender-based violence pushed me not to write the second and third pair of the household code into the Bible Study text.¹⁴

Finally, I decided against presenting my own translation of the text: all participants were encouraged to bring whichever translation they were comfortable with, and for the illustration of the structural arrangement of the text (see below) I relied on a slightly modified text from the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version). Presenting a completely new translation would inevitably require an explanation on my part, which would in turn take up a lot of time. In addition, it might foster suspicion among those who might be potentially hostile towards the direction that the Bible Study might take.

4.2 The Detailed Design of the Bible Study

The Bible Study was divided into four stages (see Appendix 1), each with one or more fairly open questions. All participants had the questions in front of them, but only for one stage at a time so that groups would not be led by their perception of where things were going later.

As with all CBS work, the challenge was to create questions that are open enough to allow participants to explore the text in a way that seems sensible to them, while at the same time directing their focus to particular aspects of the text. As I found out, with some frustration, achieving that balance turned out to be more difficult with this text than it usually is with narrative texts.

14 Naturally, there is always a possibility for participants to notice this and to push this consideration into the Bible Study, in which case I would have to deal with it. However, the lack of frequent feedback units that the time framework imposed on the design meant that the chances of that happening were slim.

The first stage is standard in CBS: "what is this text all about?" The question is deliberately phrased in this vague fashion (and this is reiterated verbally) to enable participants to open up: Anything and everything that participants regard as being related to the text can come up here – both textual and life-context matters.

The second stage was designed to encourage an awareness of the literary context of the text, as well as its structure. To this end, I created a visually structured and slightly modified NRSV text (see Appendix 2), which was handed out at this point. Specifically, the second stage was designed to direct the participants' attention to three aspects of the text: the embeddedness of 5:22-33 in the broader section starting at 5:15; the structure of the text itself (especially the link between the 5:22-33 to 5:21); and the potential for meaning creation that arises from a reading of the text in the context of Ephesians as a whole. At this point it became clear that the questions I was able to create had to become more leading than I was happy with: for example, the very fact that I had to state what I regard to be a major theme of Ephesians is a major intervention on my part. It is also became clear that the questions tended to be long, which far from ideal.

The third stage, in this case following a morning tea break, concentrated on the detail of the text of 5:22-33. This was designed in three parts, each of which encouraged participants to consider not just what the text exhorts particular groups to do, but also *why*. This includes reflections on how the Christ-analogy in the text actually works, which itself produces useful intertextual reference points. I chose to begin with a focus on the husband (5:25-32), which is the longest part of the text – in part because it spells out the theological argument in more detail, but also because most participants would be used to focus on the briefer section on wives, and then ignore or belittle the longer part on the husbands. For that second part on the wives, I tried to engage participants in thinking about just what 'subjection' might mean *in the context of this text*: Since the tendency of readers would be a narrow focus on individual sentences and phrases, I hoped that reading 5:22-24 and 5:25-33 respectively could be related to the overall context. In the third and final part, I chose to direct the groups' attention back to a major structural issue, which constitutes the primary tension in the text, namely the contrast between the mutual subjection theme of 5:21 and the section that follows. The whole of stage 3 deliberately aims to shift the readers / listeners' attention away from a narrow focus on individual words and phrases, since that focus tends to result in free word associations

which move the focus away from the text, and therefore favours existing stereotypes rather than engagement with the text. Rather, I tried to redirect attention to the possible meaning of words and phrases in larger textual-rhetorical contexts, which enables new connections to be made.

In the fourth and last stage, I asked the groups to return to the question that caused us to look at the text in the first place: is violence against intimate partners justified by this text? In a way, this served as a way of concluding the interpretative process. However, this would not be complete (in terms of the design of a CBS) without an action plan. Given that this was an arbitrary group which would probably never meet again in this form, the usefulness of such an action plan is naturally limited. Nevertheless, I hoped that it might generate sufficient momentum to create some kind of concrete action plans among at least some participants, both individually and collectively.

Finally, since I anticipated that participants would want to hear what I thought about the text, I prepared a two-page (A4) summary of my own thinking about the text which related to the design of the Bible study process (see Appendix 3). This is not normally part of a CBS in the South African context, but in the Fijian context, I expected this request to come – and indeed, it did.

On the whole, I tried to design a process that would cover (a) a fundamental 'must' which I hoped all participants would come to realise, and (b) a secondary aim which I hoped at least some participants might begin to grapple with:

(A) The fundamental insight I hoped for is that the justification mechanism for violence is broken: the text does not in any way justify violence against women, whatever the excuses or pretexts might be. Not only is the subjection concept itself on no account a possible pretext for violence; the love paradigm, however it is understood (love is always a cultural concept), also cannot serve in that role *once it is read in the context of the Christ analogy*.

(B) In a secondary move, I tried to open up a path that questions the status-based domination strategy that undergirds the violence-legitimizing argument in the first place. By placing 5:22-33 in the context of the overarching demand for *mutual* subjection (5:21) in particular, I hoped for some reflections on the tensions within the text (see above) which, in the end, destabilise the common one-way subjection reading.

4.3 Brief Evaluation of the Event and the Design

I did not initially set out to evaluate the Bible Study: The idea of reflecting on it in this form only occurred to me after the event. As a result, I did not arrange the group work and feedback in such a way that a proper basis for results or findings is warranted. However, a few comments on impressions gathered may be in order.

Obviously, the limitations of the event, some of which I pointed out above, created unavoidable problems. Lack of time was the biggest problem: this is a common challenge when creating community Bible studies of this kind when the time framework is beyond the facilitator's control. Doing Bible studies in groups takes time, especially when a large number of people is involved, and this is often underestimated. I suspect that more time for stages 2 and 4 in particular would have been useful.

The second stage of the Bible Study seems to have been the least successful, judging by the feedback that came from groups. Perhaps there are better ways of introducing that stage; perhaps it has to do with people's prior reading experience; perhaps even with the short period of time available for this stage. Either way, all groups seemed to struggle with this stage, and the outcome was limited. During the design process, I did consider replacing stage 2 with a much briefer 'information' point, but this tends to fly in the face of the principle of such Bible studies as I understand and aim to practice them: That is, to minimise the 'leading' aspect of the questions put to the groups – which are, after all, designed to open up space rather than force people into a narrow avenue for group work.

The third stage was marred, in my view, by my overly long questions in the group handouts. I became caught here between my aim of directing attention to the detail of the text – specifically, the kind of detail that I had reason to suspect would normally be overlooked – and the overall aim of CBS work, which is to keep questions short and manageable, both because it makes them easier to comprehend, and because it limits the 'leading' aspect of questions.

Although I see much need and scope for improvement in the design and the detailed planning of this Bible Study and the process, I still hold to the fundamental concept of working with Eph 5 in this way. In what follows, I would like to reflect a little more, however tentatively, on some implications.

5 Initial Explorations of Some Implications

5.1 Ethics and Hermeneutics

Given the context of gender-based violence, a primary consideration for the purpose and therefore design of the Bible Study is to provide a framework that encourages theological-ideological possibilities to overcome patterns of domestic violence, and, if possible, practical strategies to subvert and prevent the ideologies that undergird such violence. I would argue, perhaps a little provocatively, that a Bible Study approach that does not aim to foster this is unethical.

This means in practice that any reading strategy that is encouraged in a Bible Study must, given the context of a particular reading community, enable and empower that community to engage with the text in such a way that such a basic outcome becomes possible. I would argue that my own earlier background (i.e., how I would have related to this text about 15 years ago) did not fully enable me to do that: As a young adult, whether in Germany or in South Africa, I grew up in a subculture – and therefore a particular ideological environment – which effectively rejected, and then essentially ignored texts such as the household code in Ephesians.

There were (and are) three somewhat related strategies from that context which essentially achieve this (see below). All of them are additionally beset by a more fundamental problem, namely that they make the reading community completely dependent on the supposed historical knowledge of an outsider expert.

Firstly, a fairly common cultural-hermeneutical model is to relativise (and therefore effectively reject) a text like Eph 5:21 – 6:9 as something that is important or relevant only within a specific cultural-historical context. I have frequently encountered this, across continents and churches, including the Pacific. It is possible to do this in quite sophisticated ways, and from a fairly broad range of theological perspectives.¹⁵ Yet the fundamental problem with this approach is that it can be used to relativise virtually any text.

Secondly, a few scholars (e.g., Munro 1972) have argued that texts like Eph 5:21 – 6:9 are later additions to the text of Ephesians ("interpolations"). Neither I nor the vast majority of scholars are persuaded by such arguments, which are based on far too rigid and

¹⁵ Even Gordon Fee's approach, which comes from a moderate evangelical perspective, eventually falls into this mode (Fee 2002).

streamlined a view of what 'the original text' as written by 'the original author' could have looked like. In essence, it seems far too easy and simplistic to me to 'edit out' texts that do not appear to fit a predetermined pattern of what scholars think Paul (or whoever the writer of Ephesians is supposed to be) generally writes. This is not to suggest that interpolations in Biblical texts should be ruled out *per se*, but rather that we need more evidence to support this kind of possibility than a supposed internal contradiction, or preconceived ideas about the historical development of early Christianity in the first century.

This takes me to the third, and in fact fairly common hermeneutical strategy, which is based on a particular historical understanding of the New Testament. A good example is provided by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite (Thistlethwaite 1985) when she argues that

Liberation from ... [Eph 5] requires a recognition of its location within the biblical materials and of the function this particular emphasis in Ephesians played in the history of the church. In the pseudo-Pauline epistles,¹⁶ a shift away from the egalitarian ethos of the Jesus movement can be observed.

This is a fairly common approach, especially in 1970s and 1980s liberation-theological type readings, including feminist theology. It assumes that there was some kind of egalitarian first generation of Christians, which was followed by successive stages of cultural accommodation which moved away from those egalitarian origins. It is debatable whether this kind of argument is ultimately persuasive at the historical level, and also how such debates function at a meta-critical level, but that is another matter (cf. Beavis 2007). What is important in my context here in Fiji is that historical distinctions based on the model of 'egalitarian origins which are subsequently corrupted' are simply not persuasive. What people see is the canonical text as it stands; theological value distinctions based on historical models are usually outside of the scope of people's hermeneutical framework. This is not to say that historical arguments are never useful; neither does it deny that this is a persuasive reading in other contexts.

I am reminded here of Robert Allen Warrior's point about the conquest narrative in Joshua and its absence in first-generation liberation theology (Warrior 1989, 262):

¹⁶ Like many scholars, Thistlethwaite maintains that Ephesians was not written by Paul, but by a 'Pauline school', perhaps some years after Paul's death.

People who read the narratives read them as they are, not as scholars and experts would like them to be read and interpreted. History is no longer with us. The narrative remains.

Warrior's critique of liberation theology and the point he makes here is not without its own problems. Nevertheless, I would argue that a Bible Study approach in the community context that I find myself in requires careful attention to the text *as it stands*: 'the epistle and its text remains'. Put differently: If I were to choose a reading strategy for the Bible Study that is so alien to the community that people are not able to see *for themselves* what the text's potential for meaning disclosure is, both I and that approach would be a failure with potentially disastrous consequences for participants. Once again, this would constitute an unethical hermeneutical approach.

To return to Thistlethwaite's argument, pointing to texts like Gal 3:28 (as she does) is potentially more meaningful, though my own hermeneutical foundation for this would not be historical – which is hard to demonstrate in a Bible Study – but rather canonical-theological. The point is not to privilege a text because it stems from a time of supposed egalitarian origins, but rather to explore texts creatively that stand in tension. Ultimately this will result in privileging certain texts as well, perhaps even the same texts, but it will have to do this on a different theological foundation – and in the process, we might discover that texts which are at first sight fundamentally oppressive nevertheless hold some liberative potential in certain contexts.

One might say – and indeed, it would be unreasonable to do so – that my reading strategy is a kind of 'reading against the grain' (Domeris 1991; Reid n.d.; Wire 1990; West 2004b), at least from the perspective of the specific academic interpreter who designed the Bible Study. In other words, I read the text 'against the grain' of the interpretative tradition, and perhaps also against the grain of the text itself, if I think of the text historically.

Therefore, an approach which foregrounds rhetorical and canonical connections begins with the premise that no text, however problematic in a first reading, is rejected out of hand. Every text is to be pondered, researched, questioned with a view to its liberative potential within its canonical and life contexts. To be sure: not all texts will reveal something along those lines. Nevertheless, my approach is that of Jacob at Jabbok, adopting the phrase and

attitude of: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me" (Gen 32:26, NRSV).

5.2 Theological-Methodological Explorations

I am encouraged here, however, by something that a key feminist scholar, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, wrote some 30 years ago (1984, 175). She argued in *Bread, Not Stone*, that she sought

to empower religious wo/men who, for whatever reasons, are still affected by the bible to read 'against the very grain' of its patri-kyriarchal rhetoric.

Whether or to what extent my own reading strategy is related to hers is another matter, which I will not explore here. I will also ignore that somewhat pejorative word 'still' in that sentence. What is important to me is that, in any given community context, I try to find methodological approaches to the text which take seriously where people are at, and to select an approach which 'works' within that environment.

This creates a certain tension for me as an interpreter who reads and interprets in a scholarly tradition which is fundamentally based on historical hermeneutics, and specifically methodologies which foreground social aspects: in a nutshell, socio-historical and social-scientific criticism informed by a liberation-theological hermeneutic. However, I would argue that in certain contexts – and with certain texts – the kind of rhetorical-canonical approach I took in this Bible study is equally valid, even though it may lead to a different kind of interpretative conclusion with regard to the same text.

It is important for me that this is not simply seen as a strategic or tactical choice: it is also a theological one. I wish to explore texts in a way that looks for whatever liberative potential there is in any given text, while recognising that some texts will not only resist this, but also make it impossible: after all, there *are* different voices within the Scriptures; the Bible is a site of struggle at a textual and historical, and not just an interpretative level.

The liberative potential of a given text does not exclude the recognition of dangers that may be perceived in the act of interpretation. For example, I read John's Apocalypse as a text that encourages and admonishes its readers / listeners in the first century to resist the temptation of falling for the ideologies and practices of the Roman empire; yet I am conscious of the dangers inherent in the

dualistic, sometimes violent, and certainly flatly condemnatory aspects of the text of Rev which have had a deeply troublesome history of effect.

Looking at a text like Eph 5, I think it is theologically appropriate to operate in two different modes when confronted with different contexts: both the rhetorical-canonical approach taken in the Bible Study I designed, *and* some of the historically based feminist approaches I mentioned from another context are expressions of a liberative reading which may be appropriate. Paradoxically, they both represent, as it were, the truth of the text.

5.3 Tentative Historical Questions

I am not primarily concentrating on historical arguments in this paper, since my primary focus is on a liberative reading in a given contemporary context. For example, I am not arguing that the tension between 5:21 and 5:22-33 is 'intended' by the letter-writer, nor that the first, primary audience would have inevitably seen that tension. Instead, my focus is on exploring what might happen for us as interpreters once we notice that potential tension.

Having said that, such an observation might also feed back into historical considerations. I am mindful here of the recent discussion of multiple and complex identities in real first-century congregations¹⁷ as well as the recent scholarly interest in the imperial context and the complex and diverse responses to that context especially among subjected peoples (something usually referred to as postcolonial criticism, though it is much broader than that).¹⁸

The readers in the Bible Study in Suva no doubt constructed their own way through the text, and will continue to do so. In real life, this involves making complex and sometimes difficult choices at different points in life. A similar scenario was no doubt at play for a first-

17 Highlighted with reference to Ephesians, for example, in the recent work of Margaret Macdonald, to which I referred earlier.

18 Scholarly literature on empire (including postcolonial studies) is considerable; I refer only to a few examples from the field of Pauline studies, such as the often overlooked early work of Klaus Wengst (1987), but also a series of volumes edited by Richard Horsley (1997, 2000, 2008), and the useful recent collection of studies on Paul and postcolonialism edited by Christopher Stanley (2011). A useful summary is presented by Judy Diehl (2012).

century audience. I therefore wonder whether there is something in the reading direction I discussed above which might be of use in a reconsideration of the text in its first-century context: If (some of) the participants – and I – can see and gain inspiration from the prominence of 5:21 and the challenge of mutual subjection in relation to 5:22-33, can we exclude a similar interpretative choice amongst some early Christian readers? Various possibilities exist for this, which it might be useful to explore further: could this text conceivably be read through a 'hidden transcript' perspective (Scott 1990; Horsley 2004)? Are we reading the text at the level of the supposed intention of the writer, and/or the possible responses of the first audience – and what are the hermeneutical implications of this?

6 By Way of Conclusion

I ended the last paragraph with some tentative questions, and this mode of speech seems appropriate as an ending for this paper, which is essentially a reflection on practice. For that reason, I have also refrained from changing (in the sense of improving) the handouts and the Bible study design after the event: this is meant to be a look at the reflective practice of a theologian, 'warts and all'.

Writing this paper has turned out to be a useful exercise for me; as to whether it is something of interest for anyone else – that is up to the reader to decide.

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Appendix 1

This is the handout for participants at the Suva Bible study. Cutting lines are indicated. The original was designed to fit on two A4 sheets.

Bible Study on Ephesians 5:21-33

First, someone should please volunteer to act as a time-keeper (who reminds you that it is time to move to the next stage). Also, someone should act as a scribe who takes notes so that the group can report at the end – though it does not have to be the same person for the whole Bible Study.

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers as such: the point of this Bible Study is to allow people to speak as freely and honestly as possible. It is unlikely that we will be able to explore all aspects of this text – but we can make a good start.

Be prepared for different views in your group. If groups are large, bear in mind that everyone should be able to speak, if they wish to – therefore, please keep your own contributions reasonably short and to the point, and listen carefully to others.

Finally, please don't forget that the text comes from a letter with a complex argument: be prepared to read carefully. Do not be afraid to ask searching questions of the text.

Stage 1 (15 minutes)

Having heard read Eph 5:21-33 being read aloud, please consider this question:

- What is this text all about?

This is an open question: feel free to bring up anything that comes to mind when you read this text.

----- cut here -----

Bible Study on Ephesians 5:21-33 (in the context of 5:15-33)

Stage 2 (20 minutes)

A. Take a look at the structure of the text of Eph 5:15-33 in the handout. The structured text handout is designed to show how vv. 21-33 fit into the context of the argument in 5:15-33, and also how the argument of the whole text flows.

- What can we learn from vv. 15-20 about vv. 21-33?
- What can we learn from the structure in the handout? Is it useful? Are there other ways of structuring the text which would perhaps better represent what it has to say?

B. The theme of Ephesians could be called "overcoming enmity" (division based on hate), first between Jew and Gentile, but then also beyond that: perhaps one person could read aloud 2:11-22, especially vv.14-16. The letter writer later relates his very own purpose of existence to that theme (3:1-13, especially v. 6). As a result, the encouragement to live well and just (Eph 4-6) is also based on that theme (read 4:1-3).

- How does our text (5:15-33) relate to the letter's overall theme of 'overcoming enmity'?

----- cut here -----

Bible Study on Ephesians 5:21-33 (in the context of 5:15-33)

Stage 3 (45 minutes)

A. Focus on 'the husband'.

- The longest part of the text is addressed to husbands (vv. 25-32). What are husbands meant to do, and why?
- The fundamental analogy that supports the argument in this whole text is this: the husband-wife relationship is like the Christ-church relationship. But what is actually said about Christ-church relationship?

- How does Christ love / relate to the church, according to this text? (Also see: Eph 5:2)
- Beyond this text, what does Christ do for the church / people? Think of the gospels, for example: do any texts come to mind that are similar to Eph 5:2 and our text?
- Summarise what we can learn from all this.

B. Focus on 'the wife'.

- What are wives meant to do, and why? Consider, for example:
 - What does it mean that the wife is 'to subject' herself (vv. 22-24) in the context of this text? What reasons are given?
 - "... just as Christ is the head of the church": how is Christ the head of the church? How does the analogy to the wife-husband relationship actually function?

C. The whole section of vv. 22-33 may be considered as an extension of the end of v. 21: "*be subject to one another* out of reverence for Christ".

- What can we learn from the relationship between v. 21 and vv. 22-33?

Related to this:

- Does the wife's subjection to the husband mean that she does not love her husband? Why / why not?
- Conversely, does the husband's love of his wife mean that he is not subject to her? Why / why not?

----- cut here -----

Bible Study on Ephesians 5:21-33 (in the context of 5:15-33)

Stage 4 (30 minutes)

A. Bearing in mind everything we have discussed so far, please consider this questions:

- Is violence towards the marital partner (or anyone else) justified in Eph 5:15-33? Why / why not?

B. What are you going to do about what you have learned?

Think about this both personally / individually, and collectively. Please do not concentrate exclusively on what others (for example, "the leaders") should do, but also on what you can do.

----- cut here -----

Appendix 2

This is the handout on the structure of the text (see Stage 2). The original was designed to fit on a single A4 sheet.

Ephesians 5:15-33

Translation: NRSV (paragraph structure adapted to show the sense units and their relationships to each other). I have made a couple of changes to the NRSV wording (changes in *italics*) in order to reflect the Greek text better, with the replaced NRSV text in brackets.

Feel free at any point to compare individual text sections with the Bible translations you brought with you.

¹⁵ Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ *Therefore (se)* do not be *without understanding (foolish)*, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit:

¹⁹ as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts,
²⁰ giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
²¹ *being (be)* subject to one another out of reverence for Christ:

²² Wives, be subject to your husbands, as you are to the Lord.

²³ For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.† ²⁴ Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives,

just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word,

²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

²⁸ In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

²⁹ For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it:

just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body.

³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³² This is a great mystery,* and I am applying‡ it to Christ and the church.

³³ Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Notes

† "the body of which he is the Saviour" = (Christ is) the Saviour of the body (that is, the church)"

* "mystery": the English word is misleading in the sense that the Greek *mysterion* refers to an aspect of true reality which can only be understood through divine revelation.

‡ "I am applying it to" = more literally, this translates as "I say (this) with regard to"

Holger Szesnat, 4 December 2014

Appendix 3

At the very end of the Bible study I was asked to comment on the text myself, which I did with reference to this handout, which I had prepared in order to be ready for this eventually. The handout was originally designed to fit on two A4 pages.

Comments: Bible Study on Ephesians 5:21-33

Holger Szesnat, 4 December 2014

The following short notes were written to follow on structured group work on Eph 5:15-32 in the context of gender-based violence. My comments are not meant to be 'the final word' on anything. Perhaps one could think of it as giving me the opportunity to say something, too, now that everyone else has had their say. Of course, that is not the whole story: after all, I have probably influenced you in some way already, simply by structuring the group work, offering questions and focus areas. Nevertheless, a few thoughts on the topic – but only as much as I can fit on two pages.

1. I begin by picking up an area I put last in the Bible Study: does this text justify violence? If we read the text carefully, I have no doubt that the answer has to be 'no'. *Eph 5 does not in any way justify violence*; indeed, what it encourages or expects is the very opposite of violence. If we look at the whole of Ephesians, that becomes even clearer: the letter states that enmity among humankind has been overcome by or through Christ. *Violence has absolutely no place among Christians*. Nevertheless, I have heard arguments among Christians (both men and women) along the following lines: Eph 5 (and a few others texts in the Scriptures, such as Gen 3:16) are used to claim a status-based difference between men and women, husbands and wives. Based on that supposedly fixed status hierarchy, it is then claimed that a woman who does not do what her husband tells her to do deserves to be beaten. But whatever we make of the issue of status (more about that later), the claim that 'disobedience', or whatever we may call it, somehow calls for violence has no basis in this text. In fact, there is nothing in the Scriptures I can think of that justifies husbands beating their wives. In the sense that the Scriptures use the terms, neither 'love' nor 'respect' can in any way include violence between men and women, let alone husbands and wives.

2. Nevertheless, Eph 5 (as well as a number of other texts) is often used to justify the *foundations* of that chain of argument, namely that there is a hierarchy between men and women, or more specifically, husbands and wives. This is a complex question, and the Bible Study I invited you to work through was largely designed to explore this. There are indeed a range of opinions on this matter among Christians. (a) Some people argue that texts like Eph 5 establish some kind of fixed divine order that establishes a hierarchy between men and women (and specifically: husbands and wives): let's call this the 'fixed gender hierarchy' approach. (b) Others suggest that the scriptural texts we are reading were written in a cultural context which already assumed that women were inferior to men: therefore, it is said, the writers of the Scriptures addressed something that may have been appropriate within that context, but this is not a fixed, eternal matter. If society changes (and not all change is negative), such texts become irrelevant. One could call this 'the cultural context approach'.

3. I am not inclined to follow either argument. Let me start with that 'cultural context approach'. While it may be attractive at first, it also bears its own dangers. For example: if we follow the cultural argument, we would also have to follow this line of thinking for any other matters in the Scriptures which happen to be in line with the culture from which it comes. Logically, this would mean we could only take things in the Scriptures as 'relevant' that contradict the cultural environment. I am not convinced that this is a useful approach.

On the other hand, I am not convinced by the 'fixed gender hierarchy' approach either. This is because the study of the Scriptures does not, in the end, convince me that gender hierarchies are ultimately fixed – nor, indeed, any human hierarchies, or any status-based thinking. Obviously, this is a big claim which I cannot fully support in a short paper like this: one would need to write several books to do so properly. Still, I base my claim on a careful reading of the Scriptures, and I would like to offer a few notes on Eph 5 in this respect. It is worth noting here that the letters of the New Testament are essentially propositional: that is, they are largely arguments meant to persuade their readers. At first sight, Eph 5 seems to state clearly how husbands and wives are meant to relate: wives, respect your husbands; and husbands, love your wives (Eph 5:22-33). But once we start to look more closely, I suggest, we will find that this is less clear than what a first reading seems to find:

4. The structure of the argument clearly suggests that vv. 22-33 depend on v. 21 ("being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ"), which is itself the last of a series of examples of what it means "to be filled by the Spirit" (v. 18): it is this imperative 'to be filled with the Spirit' that is the main point on which everything else hangs. The writer clearly thinks that *mutual subjection of people* is called for in a spirit-filled life. That is an idea we can find in many parts of the Scriptures, such as in the gospels (e.g., Mt 20:25-26), and Christ himself is, as in our text in Eph 5, shown to be a role model worth imitating (e.g., Phil 2:5-11).

5. When we turn to what is being said to wives (Eph 5:22-24) and husbands (5:25-32), it would appear that suddenly only wives are supposed to be *subject* (to their husbands), whereas husbands are meant to *love* their wives. This is puzzling: what happened to *mutual subjection* (v. 21)? For both wives and husbands, the reasons given for their relationship rest on the same fundamental analogy: that of the Christ – Church relationship. That however, raises the question of *just how Christ and the church are related*.

5a. It is useful here to start with the husbands, in part because much more is said about them than about wives. The key, it seems to me, lies in the very first point: "love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (5:25), which repeats a point that was made in Eph 5:2. Christ's love for the church (and as other texts indicate, the whole of creation) is characterised by what one could call his self-sacrifice. To illustrate that point, the writer first uses an image that we already see in the prophets (e.g., Ez 16): the people of God are like a bride to God in the sense that God is so in love with his people that God wants them to be radiant in splendour: that is, they radiate holiness. The second argument (separate, but linked) is based on what we might call a 'common sense' approach (5:28-29): we look after our own bodies; we 'tend and care for them'. This point is appropriate because the church is the body of Christ. The logic of the final point (vv. 31-32), which recalls Gen 2:24, is more difficult to understand, though it seems to me that it is designed to explain why Christ (or indeed God) loves people, and why the people of God are the body of Christ. – The outcome of all this is that the way a husband ought to relate to his wife is based on a self-sacrificing love which treats 'the other half' as carefully and lovingly as oneself. This whole line of reasoning in Eph 5:25-32 is in keeping, I would argue,

with the notion of *mutual subjection*: I subject myself to the other by loving the other.¹

5b. Wives are encouraged to subject themselves to their husbands *as the church subjects itself to Christ*. This does not make the husband Christ-like (the husband is not the Saviour of the wife; Christ is the Saviour of both!). Rather, the point of the analogy lies in the *relationship* aspect: the key point is "just as Christ is the head of the church" (5:23). But *just how is* Christ the head of the church? It is dangerous to jump to our own ideas here as to what this 'headship' is. I propose that it is more appropriate to look at how the text itself characterises how Christ is 'the head': the Scriptures frequently use concepts that seem familiar to us, but then firmly twist their meaning to subvert our assumptions.² It seems to me that the very thing that is said about Christ in respect of his love of the people (Eph 5:2 and 5:25) is crucial here: I subject myself to Christ precisely because of Christ's love.

6. In the end, mutual subjection is a logical impossibility: taken literally, it would create an eternal loop along the lines of "no, you first", – "but no, you first", and so on, for all eternity. That hardly seems to be the point. Rather, mutual subjection has the effect of undermining the very basis of status-based thinking and action. Our text does not openly attack hierarchical structures in the way that, say, Gal 3:28 does: it is more subtle than that, but just as subversive of our human tendency to think in status terms.

Some literature

Good books are hard to get hold of in Fiji, but some have access to the internet (though much relevant material on the internet is dubious). I did not aim to be representative of all views; nor do I necessarily agree with the arguments offered.

Belz, Lisa Marie. 2013. "The Rhetoric of Gender in the Household of God: Ephesians 5:21-33 and Its Place in Pauline Tradition". Ph.D. thesis,

- 1 It may be useful here to think of what is said in 1 Cor 7:4 about the sexual aspect of the relationship between husbands and wives: "For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." Clearly, the notion of mutual subjection is taken very seriously here.
- 2 The very term 'Saviour' is part of that: the Roman emperor claimed to be the saviour of the world. By calling Jesus 'Saviour', the New Testament not only calls the emperor a liar, but also *subverts the violent nature of the emperor's understanding of what a saviour is*: Jesus' self-sacrifice is the supreme act of salvation; it is the 'slain lamb' (see Rev) that is victorious.

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